

The Obviousness of Anarchy: The Question - The Art of Not Being Governed

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"You see, but you do not observe."

Sherlock Holmes to Dr. John Watson in A Scandal in Bohemia

I. Introduction

In this article, I have been asked to present an argument for anarchy. This is an absurdly easy thing to do. In fact, it is a task that can be discharged in two words—look around. However, because most of us, like Dr. Watson, see without observing the significance of what we see, some commentary is required.

Anarchy refers to a society without a central political authority. But it is also used to refer to disorder or chaos. This constitutes a textbook example of Orwellian newspeak in which assigning the same name to two different concepts effectively narrows the range of thought. For if lack of government is identified with the lack of order, no one will ask whether lack of government actually results in a lack of order. And this uninquisitive mental attitude is absolutely essential to the case for the state. For if people were ever to seriously question whether government actions are really productive of order, popular support for government would almost instantly collapse.



Philadelphia police force.

The identification of anarchy with disorder is not a trivial matter. The power of our conceptions to blind us to the facts of the world around us cannot be gainsaid. I myself have had the experience of eating lunch just outside Temple University's law school in North Philadelphia with a brilliant law professor who was declaiming upon the absolute necessity of the state provision of police services. He did this just as one of Temple's uniformed private armed guards passed by us escorting a female student to the Metro stop in this crime-ridden neighborhood that is vastly underserved by the

A wise man once told me that the best way to prove that something is possible is to show that it exists. That is the strategy I shall adopt in this article. I intend to show that a stable, successful society without government can exist by showing that it has, and to a large extent, still does.

II. Defining Terms and Limitations

I am presenting an argument for anarchy in the true sense of the term—that is, a society without government, not a society without governance. There is no such thing as a society without governance. A society with no mechanism for bringing order to human existence is oxymoronic; it is not “society” at all.

One way to bring order to society is to invest some people with the exclusive power to create and coercively enforce rules which all members of society must follow; that is, to create a government. Another way to bring order to society is allow people to follow rules that spontaneously evolve through human interaction with no guiding intelligence and may be enforced by diverse agencies. This article presents an argument for the latter approach; that is, for a spontaneously ordered rather than a centrally planned society.

In arguing for anarchy, I am arguing that a society without a central political authority is not only possible but desirable. That is all I am doing, however. I am not arguing for a society without coercion. I am not arguing for a society that abides by the libertarian non-aggression principle or any other principle of justice. I am not arguing for the morally ideal organization of society. I am not arguing for utopia. What constitutes ideal justice and the perfectly just society is a fascinating philosophical question, but it is one that is irrelevant to the current pursuit. I am arguing only that human beings can live together successfully and prosper in the absence of a centralized coercive authority. To make the case for anarchy, that is all that is required.

An additional limitation on my argument is that I do not address the question of national defense. There are two reasons for this. One is the logical one that a society without government is a society without nations. In this context, “national” defense is a meaningless concept. If you wish, you may see this as an assertion that an argument for anarchy is necessarily an argument for global anarchy. I prefer to see it merely as the recognition that human beings, not nations, need defense. The more significant reason, however, is that I regard the problem of national defense as trivial for reasons I will expand upon subsequently.¹

III. The Question

Whether government is necessary is not an abstract metaphysical question. It is an entirely practical question concerning the delivery of goods and services. The defenders of government argue that certain goods or services that are essential to human life in society can be supplied only by a government. Anarchists deny this. The question, then, is whether there are any essential goods or services that can be supplied only through the conscious actions of human beings invested with the power to enforce rules on all members of society.

Note that the question is not whether the “market” can supply all necessary goods and services, at least not the market as it is usually defined by economists. Some anarchists argue that the free market can supply all necessary goods and services. But the case for anarchy does not require that one assert this claim, and I do not. Anarchy requires, and I argue, only that no essential good or service must be supplied through the conscious actions of the agents of a coercively maintained monopoly. Properly understood, the question is whether there are some essential goods and services that must be provided politically or whether all such goods and services can be provided by non-political means.²

Many political theorists argue that there is a wide array of goods and services that must be provided by the state. In the present context, however, there is no need to consider whether the government must provide postal service, elementary schooling, or universal health insurance. The debate between anarchists and the supporters of a classical liberal, night watchman state concerns the core functions of government. The question thus resolves itself into whether these core functions can be supplied through non-political means.

To be continued in [The Obviousness of Anarchy: The Creation of Rules Of Law](#)

Footnotes

1 See infra §III(E).

2 In this article, the term “political” will be used to refer to the output of government, and “non-political” to the product of all other forms of action.

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